

You Got to Compromise Sometimes

By Jack Ritchie

NOTE: This story took 127th place (out of 200 winners) in the 1953 Writer's Digest Short Short Story Contest. It was never published.

When I got home after the game, Grandpa was in the kitchen fixing the toaster. Ma looked up from the stove where she was cooking dinner.

She came over and touched the place where my lip was swollen and a little cut. "Another fight?"

Grandpa came right to the point. "Did you win?" He looked hopeful.

"Nope," I said. "I even tried the bolo punch you showed me. Didn't do no good."

"Well, now," he said. "I didn't learn that punch overnight. It took a lot of practice. But when I had it down pat, I whipped a two-hundred pound man with it. Clipped him under the short ribs, as I recall."

Ma took the iodine off the shelf.

"That isn't going to do much good now," I said, but she paid me no attention.

"That's the third fight he's had this week," she said to Grandpa.

He put some finishing touches on the toaster. "He'll start winning pretty soon."

"I don't care whether he wins or not," she said impatiently. "He's too little to fight and he'll always be too little."

Grandpa didn't say anything, but you could tell by his face that he was exasperated.

Ma got through with my lip and put the stopper on the iodine bottle. "If he ever gets to be more than five foot four when he's grown he'll be lucky." She looked hard at Grandpa. "He'll be about your size and weight."

"I might grow more," I said. "And besides, it doesn't matter. I just need experience."

Ma went right on talking to Grandpa. "He'll listen to you," she said, and paused. "Or would you rather that I told him a thing

or two. Like about you working at the bank for forty years as a clerk."

Grandpa was disgusted and he turned to me. "Let's you and me take a little walk before dinner," he said.

I tried to swagger like he does as he led the way around the house and onto Main Street.

Grandpa wasn't saying anything, but every once in a while he'd look at me as though he was doing heavy thinking.

I saw Mr. Clark at the counter of his butcher shop as we walked by. Mr. Clark is an awful big man, but he don't scare Grandpa none.

Two weeks ago when the pork chops had too much fat on them, me and Grandpa went to see Mr. Clark. Grandpa laid down the law and pounded on the counter and told Mr. Clark not to let it happen again.

I thought maybe there'd be a fight, but Mr. Clark looked to me like he was holding back on a grin. Grandpa explained to me that that was because of "nervous reaction." It meant that Mr. Clark was scared.

"What was you fighting about this time?" Grandpa asked.

I kicked a stone off the sidewalk. "Oh, nothing much. Red wanted to pitch and so did I. It was his ball, but I figured that if you was me you'd pitch anyway."

Grandpa seemed to agree with me, but then his face got serious. "You should have let him pitch," he said. "It was his ball and he's got the right."

"He did anyway," I said, remembering. "But pitching's important. Not like right field. You would have pitched, wouldn't you?"

"Well," he said. "You got to let other people have their rights sometimes." He glanced at me. "Especially if you're small."

"Okay," I said. "Next time I'll let Red pitch." I felt happy about that. Red hits pretty hard.

"You don't back down exactly," Grandpa

said. "Just retreat and make it look like you was advancing."

We passed Mr. Martin unloading furniture from his truck. He waved to me and Grandpa real cheerful.

I thought that was kind of queer after the way Grandpa bawled him out last week. That was when we got our new refrigerator and Mr. Martin nicked the corner of the doorway moving it in.

Boy! Grandpa sure can raise a storm when he hollers. I thought positive there was going to be a fight that time. But Mr. Martin just got nervous reaction.

"You got to remember," Grandpa said after he waved back at Mr. Martin, "that you have to use your brains and your mouth sometimes. Not always your fists."

"I'm really a lousy pitcher," I said. "Maybe for the good of the team I should let Red pitch."

Grandpa looked at me sidewise. He seemed to study me for a while and then he said, "I think you're beginning to get the idea."

We walked into the drugstore and Grandpa bought us double-decker maple nut ice cream cones. It was pretty close to dinner so I knew we'd have to keep it a secret.

When we were out in the street again, I said, "Did you really work in the bank for forty years? And were you a clerk?"

Grandpa got a couple of good licks on his cone before he answered. "Guess I did," he said. "'Course I was more like a vice-president. Just helped out with the clerking because we was short-handed."

I pushed most of the ice cream down into the cone with my tongue. "How about that time you knocked out the Judo champion of Japan with one mighty blow?"

Grandpa frowned for a long time and I thought that maybe he didn't hear me. But then he said, "Well, this Jap was traveling with the Circus. When it come here to town he challenged all comers. Did you think I was in Japan?" He laughed funny.

"What about that time on the Singapore

waterfront?" I said. "When you socked four Chinese dock-wallopers off the pier and into the water and nearly drowned them. Only you took pity and dived in and rescued them in one trip by grabbing them by their pigtailed and swimming with your powerful frog kick?"

Grandpa threw away what was left of his cone and stuck his hands in his pockets. His lips was working some, but no words was coming out.

We walked half a block while I was thinking. Things was beginning to clear up. When I had most everything worked out I saw how hard Grandpa was taking it.

So I said, "I guess that was during your vacation."

Grandpa slowed down and I almost thought he was going back to pick up that cone.

"That's right," he said, a smile coming to his face. "By golly, you hit it on the nose."

"You must have had a vacation every year," I said.

"Regular as clock work," he said, looking pleased. "Let's go back and get another cone. Maple nut again."

I thought I ought to ask him one more question. "Boy!" I said, looking at him. "You sure were brave. And even now you're not afraid of anybody, are you?"

He looked at me suspicious, and then he spoke in a sort of low voice. "You know," he said, "Nobody hits an old man. Particularly not when he's small and frail. Nobody!"

We came to the place where they was digging up the street for some sewer pipes and stopped a minute to see how they was doing.

"Did I ever tell you," Grandpa said when we started walking again, "about the time I was digging in the pyramids of Egypt and defied the curse of an ancient king. That was in 'twenty-three. During my vacation."

I decided to listen real good and maybe tell the story to Mary Lou next door. Only how it happened to me. She's a girl and she'll believe anything. ♦